

**EXAMINATION OF THE INTEGRITY OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL  
STRUCTURE OF WINDSOR TOWNSHIP FIRE DEPARTMENT/AMBULANCE  
SERVICE**

**EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT**

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An applied research project submitted to the National Fire Academy  
as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program

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## **Abstract**

The Windsor Township Fire Department and Windsor Township Ambulance Service are two separate departments with common full-time and part-time personnel, raising the issue of whether the organization is properly structured. The problem was that poor communication, conflict, and organizational instability existed. The purpose of the research was to review the current organizational structure to determine whether it was appropriate considering current literature on the subject, and if it was not, to determine a course of action to improve it. The descriptive research method was used. Questions to be answered were:

1. Is the current organizational structure sound?
2. Should the two current departments be joined together into a single entity?
3. If the two are joined, should the ambulance function be assimilated into the fire department, or should a new agency be formed to incorporate the two?
4. If a new agency is created, how should it be structured?

Procedures involved an analysis of the current organizational structure. Literature on organizational concepts, chain of command, communications within organizations, organizational change and development, and conflict resolution was reviewed and applied to the current organizational structure.

Research results showed that the current organizational structure was unsound, that the two departments should be joined into a single entity, and that this single entity should be an entirely new entity, rather than having one of the existing departments absorb the other.

It was recommended that one department be created, with full-time personnel answering to the single top position. There should be two operating divisions, fire-rescue and medical, each headed by an assistant chief. Paid-on-call personnel should continue to have a choice of serving one or the other, or both.

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## **Introduction**

Windsor Charter Township, Dimondale, Michigan, operates both a fire department and an ambulance service. Both departments share a building and generally co-exist peacefully. In the early 1990s a critical point was reached for the ambulance service and it took a step forward, hiring four career and six part-time staff and upgrading to advanced life support. With a relatively low call volume the full-time staff had time available to provide support to the fire department and even make fire runs, however the invisible barrier made serving both agencies a sensitive issue. With time and management changes several personnel, including the full-time and part-time staff, now serve in both organizations. The result has been very favorable, however the current organization is potentially unstable because of its organizational structure. A future change in management could easily reverse all of the positive strides that have been made. The problem is that poor communication, conflict, and organizational instability exist.

The purpose of this research project is to examine the current organizational structure to determine whether it is appropriate considering current literature on the subject and, if it is not, to determine a course of action to improve it. The project uses the descriptive research method. Questions to be answered are:

1. Is the current organizational structure sound?
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### **Background and Significance**

Windsor Charter Township is a typical Michigan township. It was originally 36 square miles in area but lost part of a corner section to the City of Lansing, leaving about 35 ½ square miles. It contains two major expressways, a heavily used railway, and a major river.

Demographically the community is spotted with crop-based agriculture, single family homes on large lots, a large mobile home park, a major state government complex and a small village.

The population of 6,500 consists of a mix of middle and upper middle class families.

A recent expansion of the wastewater treatment system that previously served only the village itself has provided sewer capacity in the township. The result has been the beginning of unprecedented growth. Over 750 dwelling units are on the drawing boards or under construction, a major sport and convention complex is being built, and the Michigan State Police and National Guard are planning new headquarters facilities to be built in the township.

In 1921 the Village of Dimondale purchased its first fire truck and began the official operation of the village fire department. The township had no fire department and the village fire department usually responded to fires in the township. In 1945 the township took over fire

protection, covering both the township and the village (Caruss, 1998). Ambulance service was provided by private funeral homes in the area.

In 1973 the funeral homes announced that they were no longer going to provide ambulance service. Faced with this new dilemma the community approached the fire department, which chose not to become involved in the ambulance business. Volunteers, from other than the fire department, were eventually recruited and in 1975 the Windsor Township Ambulance Service officially began operation as a separate department of township government. The service provided basic life support with one ambulance. At that point the ambulance service and the fire department were staffed completely by volunteers or “paid-on-call” members. No personnel were common to both departments.

The early 1990s found the ambulance service operating two ambulances at the limited advanced life support level and the fire department operating two engines, a medium rescue, a tanker (water tender) and a brush fire vehicle. Both departments operated from a new shared facility on a new shared radio system, and had progressed to a point where one individual was active in both departments.

Soon the ambulance service reached a staffing crisis with volunteers being in short supply and the director, having held the position since the inception of the department in 1973, announced his plans to retire. Searching for a solution, the township board once again discussed the possibility of having the ambulance operation taken over by the fire department.

This time, not only did the fire department reject the idea, but the members of the ambulance service also responded with concerns about the loss of identity and being managed by a manager who did not understand emergency medical services. The township board examined the possibilities of eliminating ambulance service completely or contracting with an outside agency to provide the service. These options met with negative responses from all sides. In the end, an individual was appointed to the position of ambulance service director from outside the ambulance department. The individual had a background in emergency medical service and coincidentally was a member of the fire department, but was acceptable to the personnel who belonged to the ambulance service. This raised to two the number of individuals who belonged to both departments.

Having the ambulance service director a subordinate of the fire chief for fire department matters, but not for emergency medical service issues, created some conflict, but the arrangement survived.

In 1993, faced with a community demand for advanced life support, the ambulance service upgraded and in the process hired four full-time and six part-time paramedics. These employees were housed in the building from which both the ambulance service and the fire department operated. Since the call volume was not high, these employees had time to provide more services than just responding to ambulance calls and maintaining the ambulances. The responsibility for the building had always rested with the fire chief and the fire department had



five vehicles to maintain. It was obvious to everyone that the full-time and part-time personnel on duty could be utilized to maintain the fire department vehicles and the building. This arrangement was established by the township board. The situation then consisted of four full-time and six part-time employees who answered to the fire chief for the purposes of maintaining the building and fire department vehicles and the ambulance director for matters relating to emergency medical services. The ambulance director continued to be subordinate to the fire chief for fire department matters but not for emergency medical services. Only two members were common to both organizations.

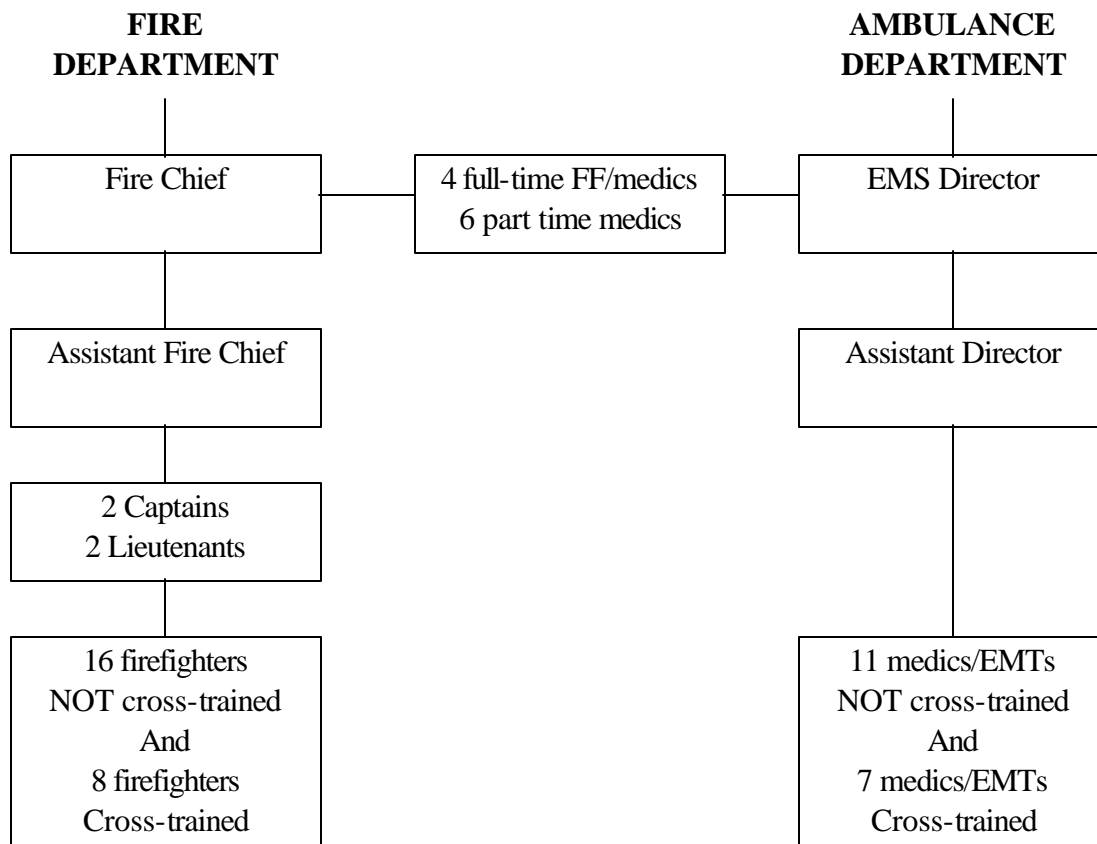
In December 1995, the fire chief announced plans to step down and in January 1996, a new chief was appointed. The new chief was the ambulance service director who had been a member of the fire department and had risen through the ranks to the position of assistant fire chief. He also retained the position of ambulance director.

The four full-time personnel received fire training and began responding to fire alarms with the paid-on-call firefighters during daytime portions of their shifts. At first this met with opposition from the paid-on-call firefighters, however when they realized that one or two full-time persons on duty at a time did not negate the need for their services this issue subsided. Several of the paid-on-call members volunteered for cross-training and new members joining were also interested in serving both.

The full-time and part-time personnel, although answering to two positions, are answering to the same person. It is clear that this singularity of leadership has had a positive effect on organizational stability. It is only coincidental that the same person holds both the fire chief and ambulance director positions and this could easily change at any time. There is still some jealousy over “turf” issues in that each is unwilling to give up its identity to the other to allow a complete joining of the personnel and resources.

Paid-on-call personnel who belong to both departments are also sensitive to this issue, finding conflict over such basic items as trying to decide which uniform to wear for formal events. Full-time and part-time personnel continue to wear ambulance service uniforms, although they spend the greater share of their time on fire department duties.

The following organizational chart depicts the current structure:



Note: Cross-trained line personnel report to command based on the functions they are performing at the time. The 8 firefighters include the 7 medics/EMTs and the Assistant EMS Director who is also cross-trained.

The National Fire Protection Association has established standards for virtually all fire department operations and issues. National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) pamphlet 1201, Standard for Developing Fire Protection Services for the Public, 1994 ed., 5-4.1, states “The fire department shall have an organizational plan that illustrates the relationship of the individual operating division to the entire organization.” It further states in Section 5-7.1 that “The fire chief shall have responsibility for all...” indicating that it is intended that a single individual should head the entire organization. The appendix supports this idea and shows several organizational charts, all indicating that single units, whether individuals or groups of individuals, all have formal reporting relationships to a single entity.

Filley, House, and Kerr (1976, p. 269) address the specific issue of organizational structure by stating “...there should be a clear chain of command and *unity of command*-each person should take orders from and be accountable to only one supervisor.”

Clearly the current organizational structure appears in question and further examination is justified.

The subject of this research paper relates to organizational change and development and creativity and innovation as discussed in Executive Development R-123, 1998.

## **Literature Review**

The issues involved with this research paper are broad-based, necessitating wide variety in the types of literature reviewed.

The study of organizational structure is not new and the original precepts have not changed significantly. Bozeman and Straussman (1984, p. 71) state "...the Old Testament records the deliberate design to organize a mass who had lost their organizational forms during a long servitude as slaves." Obviously as society has grown and been influenced by advances in technology several variables have changed somewhat, but the basics "...have gone largely unchallenged and served as a basis for the development of the culture of Western industrial society" (Bozeman and Straussman, 1984, p. 71)

Filley et al. (1976, p. 388) recognize that other lines of communication exist within an organization but continue to support the formal organization by stating "...direct day-to-day supervision comes from one formal supervisor, although advice and specialized direction may come from staff people." If one person works for two supervisors in two separate organizations at the same time, it is likely that the individual will receive very mixed signals and likewise that the feedback to the supervisors will be unclear. The condition of trying to communicate and function effectively in two organizations simultaneously certainly will cause a great deal of conflict. This supposition is supported by the work of Hughes, Ginnett, and

Curphy (1993, p. 363) who state, "...the most important source of conflict is the lack of communication..."

Schein (1980, p. 274) defines an organization as "...the planned coordination of the activities of a number of people for the achievement of some common, explicit purpose or goal, through division of labor and function, and through a hierarchy of authority and responsibility." This definition supports the need for a line of authority and chain of command, with each individual reporting to only one person, and also introduces the principle of commonality of purpose.

Bozeman and Strausmann (1984, p. 72) state that "The single most descriptive term for organization environments is change." Given the changing nature of society and this information it would seem that to deny the existence of change would be to deny reality.

Covey (1991, p. 285) discusses organizational change and states that change "...carries some degree of risk. Because of that risk and the fear of failure, many people resist change."

In spite of the willingness of the fire service to pick up new responsibilities, some new responsibilities come hard and the service is often unwilling be very open-minded. "Fire departments are stuck in the box" is the characterization of Mr. Ken Parker (personal communication, January 13, 1998) when speaking to the issue of a fire department's unwillingness to explore new ways of doing business.

Over the years the public has sought the 24-hour emergency response agency best equipped to deal with new hazards. The local fire department has repeatedly been called on and often taken on the new responsibility. Progressive managers have welcomed the challenge with open arms and minds. NFPA pamphlet 1201, Standard for Developing Fire Protection Services for the Public, 1994 ed., states that “Public fire services include, but are not limited to, fire suppression, fire prevention, fire investigations, public fire safety education, disaster management, rescue, emergency medical services, hazardous materials response, and response to other emergencies as needed.” Emergency medical service (EMS) is viewed as being within the service area of the fire department by national standards.

Ms. Rose Crenca (personal communication, January 13, 1998) indicates that the term “fire department” is “... not reflective of what you do – you need a new name.” This way of thinking seems to be supported by Michigan statistics. In Michigan, fire departments are required by section 29.4 of the Michigan Fire Prevention Code, (1941) to report fires to the State Fire Marshal. In 1996, 955 fire departments out of 1024 complied with this requirement and reported 57,259 fires (Michigan Fire Incident Reporting System [MFIRS], 1997). Fire Departments have the option of reporting non-fire responses also, but are not required to do so. In 1996, a portion of the 955 reporting fire departments also sent reports on non-fire incidents. These non-fire incidents amounted to 264,186, compared to the 57,259 fire responses. This

means that even with only a portion of the reporting departments sending information on non-fire responses, those non-fire responses accounted for more than 82% of their activity.

Other agencies have addressed the issue of changing the name of their organization from fire department to something more representative of the functions they perform. Sometimes this has been in conjunction with the assimilation of EMS into the department, and sometimes it has simply been out of a desire to bring their name up-to-date. W. Randleman (November, 1986, p. 27) discusses the wide array of services provided by the modern fire department and suggests that someday the agency may "...be called by a name such as Public Safety Department." Deputy Chief Allen Hosier (personal communication, June, 1998) describes the merger of an EMS function and a traditional fire department into the South Haven Area Emergency Services Authority. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, combined fire and EMS operations into the Emergency Response Department (Williams, 1995). Clearly bringing fire and EMS operations together into a third organization with a new name has been used as one means of dealing with conflicts which have arisen as a result of identity loss in such consolidations.

New ways of doing business are the particular subject of The Reengineering Revolution (Hammer and Stanton, 1995, p. 3). Hammer and Stanton define reengineering as "The fundamental rethinking and *radical redesign* of business *processes* to bring about *dramatic* improvements in performance." While it does not appear that something so drastic as complete reengineering is needed to resolve the issue at point, many of the principles are applicable and

there is much to be learned about effective implementation from a study of the process of reengineering. The classic resistance to change that we see in traditional organizations is perhaps explained by Hammer and Stanton (1995, p. 104) when they state “...breakthrough ideas don’t come easily. Most people aren’t trained in out-of-the-box thinking. In conventional organizations, people are encouraged to find and fix the problems in front of them...”

Hammer and Stanton (1995, p. 136) go on to say that management is faced with serious obstacles in implementing change. They state that the management team charged with the implementation “is trying to sell something to a group of people who don’t want to buy. The commodity they are selling is change, and the reluctant buyers are the people in the company.” Hammer and Stanton (1995, p. 143–148) describe ten principles to apply to reengineering communications. These principles include “segmentation of the audience” in which the characteristics and varying concerns of different groups are considered. Another key approach is to “use multiple channels of communication” and “multiple voices” to reach the various groups. This includes not only contacts and promotion of the change by several members of the management team, but also the use of other mechanisms such as logos to promote the process. Another mechanism is to “use emotions, not just logic” as people respond not only if something makes sense, but particularly well if the leader displays “...burning and sincere enthusiasm...”



## **Procedures**

Initial research for this paper was begun at the Learning Resources Center (LRC) at the National Emergency Training Center (NETC) in January 1998. The search was expanded to the Law Enforcement Resource Center at the Michigan State Police Training Academy, Lansing, Michigan, and the Business Library at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. Selections were also made from the writer's personal library.

The literature review looked primarily at organizational concepts, chain of command, communications within organizations, organizational change and development, and conflict resolution.

Deputy Chief Allen Hosier, South Haven Area Emergency Services, was interviewed by telephone.

Michigan fire statistics were reviewed in person at the Office of the State Fire Marshal.

## **Results**

The information obtained from the research provided sufficient data to answer the questions, as follows:

1. Is the current organizational structure sound? No it is not. Research validates the common sense deduction that an individual answering to two separate authorities simultaneously creates serious conflict.

2. Should the two current departments be joined together into a single entity? Yes they should. Research shows that there is commonality of purpose between the modern fire service and EMS, and indicates that they are compatible functions, with positives arising from their consolidation.
3. If the two are joined, should the ambulance function be assimilated into the fire department, or should a new agency be formed to incorporate the two? A new agency should be formed and both consolidated into it. This will minimize, or at least equalize, loss of identity concerns and provide a focal point for the forward thinking personnel who will be the cornerstones of the new agency.
4. If a new agency is created, how should it be structured? The new agency should be a singular agency directed by one individual. It should contain at least a fire/rescue division and an EMS division and should have reporting relationships consistent with sound management practices.

### **Discussion**

The works of Bozeman and Straussman (1984) and Filley et al. (1976) were applied to the existing organizational structure and revealed that it was indeed unsound. In this case the four full time and six part-time employees simultaneously report to two separate positions of equal authority, in two different organizations. In addition to the obvious conflict, this situation

results in scrambled and inconsistent communications. The work of Hughes, et al. (1993) and Schein (1980), supported the criticality of effective two-way communication in an organization, without the opportunity for conflicting messages. The only reason that the Fire Department and Ambulance Service do not suffer from complete communication failure under the current organizational structure is because one individual holds both top positions.

Schein (1980) also brought in the idea of commonality of purpose. The National Fire Protection Association (1994), data from the Michigan Fire Incident Reporting System (1997), and statements by Rose Crenca (personal communication, January 13, 1998), all point toward the fact that the modern fire service actually provides a wide variety of services. In almost every case fire department services and EMS are tied into one agency, sometimes called the fire department and sometimes called by another, more correctly descriptive name. The wide range of responses is present in the Windsor Township Fire Department. The increasing number of individuals who serve both agencies at the line level further shows the concept that EMS and the services provided by the fire department are compatible. Application of this idea suggests that the services provided by the fire department and the services provided by the ambulance department can properly be provided by one agency.

The formation of a new department and the combining of the services of the fire department and ambulance department into one new department with a different name are not a new one. This was alluded to by W. Randleman (November, 1986), who suggested "Public

Safety Department” and described as an “amalgamation” by Williams (1995) in his paper about the merging of fire and EMS services in the Edmonton “Emergency Response Department”.

Deputy Chief Allen Hosier (personal communication, June, 1998) described a very similar situation which resulted in the South Haven Area “Emergency Services Authority”. Ms. Rose Crenca (personal communication, January 1998) stated “...you need a new name.”

Merging the two functions into one organization will be perceived as involving a significant amount of organizational change. While many people resist change (Covey, 1991), change is a necessary part of the life of an organization. Bozeman and Strausmann (1984, p. 72) support this strongly in their premise that the environment in which an organization exists has change as its “...single most descriptive term.” Mr. Ken Parker (personal communication, January 13, 1998) further describes modern fire departments as being naturally resistive to change when he says they are “...stuck in the box.” Hammer and Stanton (1995, p. 104) also related to the “box” and state that “Most people aren’t trained...” to think outside of it.

Merging the two functions together into a new agency will likely be viewed as being more acceptable to the members of both departments, as they are all equal partners in the new agency, compared to one function being taken over by the other. While this tactic does not eliminate the change, it will be viewed as less threatening. It will also give a common focus, particularly for the four full-time and six part-time personnel and those paid-on-call members who are active in both.

Beyond this concept, the principles of Hammer and Stanton (1995) can be applied to assist in the implementation of the change. The audience can be broken down into the different groups and each approached in a somewhat different way. There will be members in both the fire department and the ambulance department, as well as the full-time and part-time personnel who will support the change without question. There will also be those who would not object as long as they were given assurance that they would not be forced to learn and practice the skills of the other department as a part of the change. There will also be those who resist based on “tradition” or simply out of fear of change.

The Hammer and Stanton (1995, p. 144) principles of using “multiple channels and voices” can also be used. A new logo could be established that was attractive to people even outside the organization that would then actually assist in promoting the change. All members of the management team would need to be involved in promoting the change to the various groups, using a planned strategy and communicating openly. The management team, besides being of one mind in their message, should all demonstrate the “sincere enthusiasm” as described by Hammer and Stanton (1995, p. 148).

It is worth noting that individuals who have been active with the fire department for many years have voiced the most resistance during discussions of this topic within the fire department and ambulance department. The fire department is much older and is very cast in a tradition, which goes back literally hundreds of years. Emergency medical service as we know

it today is relatively new, having been born in the 1970s. Because of the newness, significant technical advances, and the high level of licensure and oversight, persons who are active in this organization are much less resistant to change.

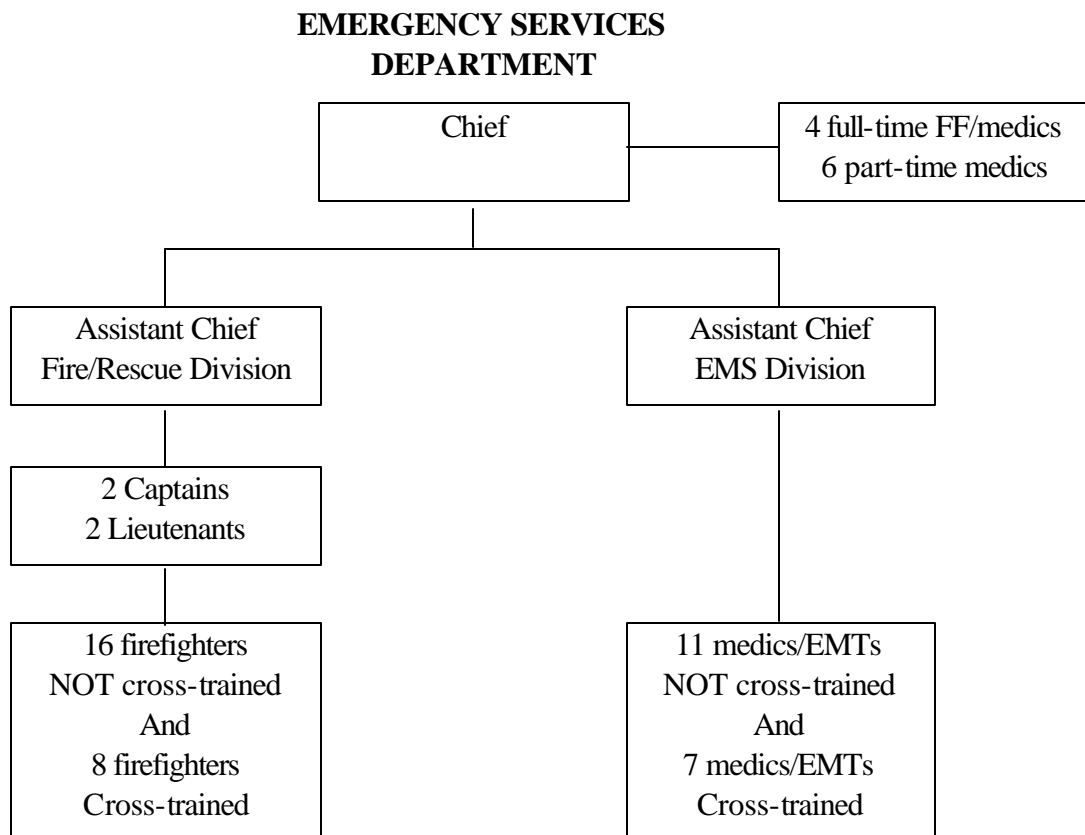
### **Recommendations**

The functions currently being performed by the Windsor Township Fire Department and the Windsor Township Ambulance Department should be merged in a single new agency. The new agency should have two primary operating divisions, one focused on the services previously provided by the fire department and one focusing on the services previously provided by the ambulance department. Full-time and part-time staff would show as a staff function reporting directly to the chief of the department. Each primary operating division would be headed by an assistant chief and would be further staffed by officers and other personnel similar to the way the two departments are staffed at present.

Paid-on-call members would still have the option of serving in both divisions or only one. This would maximize available personnel, including those who did not have the desire or availability to serve in both. All would belong to a common department giving the strength of a larger, more well rounded, more adaptable, organization.

Names would have to be chosen for the department and the divisions to be different than the previous names and more properly represent their true missions.

For example, the department might be called “Emergency Services” to represent the broad spectrum of functions performed by the newly created department. Fire department functions might be vested in the “Fire-Rescue” division, which while not really as broad as the functions, represents something more inclusive than “Fire” by itself, and still maintains touch with the tradition of the fire service. More than two years ago, the ambulance service became the first governmental ambulance service in the area to provide non-emergency ambulance service. Additional community medical services are currently under investigation. An appropriate name for the ambulance department functions might be “Medical” division. The new organization would look like this:



NOTE: Cross-trained personnel report to command based on the functions they are performing at the time. The 8 firefighters include the 7 medics/EMTs and the Assistant Chief/EMS who is also cross-trained.

This proposal satisfies the requisite conditions for a sound organizational structure, valid lines of communication, and an effective chain of command as described by Bozeman and Straussman (1984), Filley et al. (1976), Hughes, et al. 1993), Schein (1980), and Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy (1993). Individuals report only to one person as their primary supervisor and there is a clear position of authority and responsibility at the top of the organization.

The organization has the “commonality of purpose” described by Schein (1980) and is consistent with national standards (NFPA, 1994). While not radical, it does begin to recognize the out of the box thinking suggested by Parker (personal communication, January 13, 1998) and Hammer and Stanton (1995).

While a certain amount of risk is involved in any major organizational change (Covey, 1991), it is also imperative that the organization move forward and recognize the needs of a changing society.

Implementing the change will be a challenge. A complete “buy-in” by the management team consisting of the fire chief/EMS director, the assistant fire chief, and the assistant EMS director will be required. The management team must be firm in its commitment to convert to an Emergency Services department, meeting one of the criteria established by Hammer and



Stanton (1995) for using emotion to implement change. Different members of the management team will be able to bring to bear varying levels of influence on various groups within the departments. This is consistent with Hammer and Stanton's principle of using multiple voices. The full-time personnel, the part-time personnel, and all of the cross-trained paid-on-call members will probably be completely on-board early in the process and provide additional voices to the effort.

Hammer and Stanton's (1995) concept of multiple channels can be implemented by developing and beginning to promote a new logo as the symbol of the progressive new organization. New badges and shoulder patches bearing the new logo can be rolled out to the officers, full-time personnel, and cross-trained paid-on-call personnel first.

The implementation of these recommendations is critical to the provision of emergency services to the community. It has been clearly demonstrated that the current organization is not properly structured and is fragile at best.

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